

The Creation Mandate

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In the form of a letter to a friend...

Thank you for your letter about your job frustrations. I can relate personally to what you're going through. The kinds of experiences you are having I have had as well. You have raised many specific questions that I want to try to address, but know that I do so from the standpoint of one who deals with the issues much as you do.

What I find happening with so many Christians is that they try to deal with work and vocational issues outside of the context of their overall purpose as creatures, and as renewed creatures in Christ. They look at their work from a grid of self-fulfillment, or self-realization, or need for money, or whatever. People try to understand their work frustrations apart from an appreciation for the consequences of the fall of humankind into sin and the subsequent curse upon human experience. There seems to be a lot of false idealism and utopianism when it comes to the fulfillment we hope to derive from our work, and thus little room for dealing well with the realities. So both in regard to the real purpose of work, and in regard to the frustrations of work, over and over I see Christian men and women facing work issues not from a Biblical perspective at all. Thus, I would like to lay a foundation for further discussion by looking at what the first three chapters of Genesis have to say about our work.

Your work cannot be understood apart from understanding who you are as created by God. Do not even try to figure out your situation apart from this. The reason you exist and the reason your work cannot be separated.

You and I as human beings are like other created things - trees, rocks, angels, birds, mountains, planets, moss, etc. We all stand on the same side, the same end of the created order. God made us. As it says in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." We as human beings are included with everything else in the catch-all phrase, "the heavens and the earth." All of the created order has been made by God and exists for the same ultimate reason. Since this reason is doxological in that it has to do with our bringing glory and praise to God ("Doxological" derives from "doxa," the Greek root word for glory), it is best stated not in some abstract formula, but in the words of the Psalmist. Psalm 19 comes to mind immediately:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

And how can I go on without quoting Psalm 148:

Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. He set them in place for

ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away. Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and maidens, old men and children. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens. He has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the LORD.

In this Psalm all of creation is being called to rise up and praise its Creator. The human beings called upon in this Psalm to praise God - the kings, princes, young men, and maidens - come at the end of a long list of created things called forth to praise God. People, like rocks and trees and animals, have the same ultimate purpose.

Created For God's Glory

These Psalms get at that root principle of why we and everything else exist - to bring glory and praise to the God of heaven and earth. As I have said, don't even try to understand yourself or your work apart from this. You cannot. You are made, you are wired, you are created for this purpose. So when we go back and read Genesis 1, the "March of Creation" as I like to call it, we must see ourselves grouped in with the "everything else" that is made, all sharing ultimately in the same purpose.

Yet, there is something different about us, even in the Genesis account. There is a sense where we stand as creatures in a class by ourselves, apart from the created order, on God's side of the equation as it were. For we see that we are made in the image and likeness of God:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness....So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27).

Much has been written about the meaning of the "image of God." Let me say for now that we originally were endowed with certain attributes of rationality, creativity, moral free agency, righteousness, holiness, capacity for relationship, all of which makes us a lot like the God who made us, a kind of "chip off the old block," if you will permit that casual expression. This God-likeness gives us the capacity to know God in relationship, and it also gives us the capacity to act and engage ourselves with respect to the rest of the created order in ways similar to how God Himself does this. Lest we be too tempted to separate our being from our doing, notice that right after God makes us, He gives us, His image-bearing creatures, a commission in His world:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Gen. 1:26).

And again:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground"(Gen. 1:28).

We cannot separate our being from our doing, our being made in a certain way and our acting in a certain way, our being made in God's image, and our commission to have dominion over the created order. Yes, our rationality, creativity, moral free agency, and capacity for relationship, all of these find expression in our direct knowing of God. But we are not made in His image just to stand there like a statue "knowing" Him. Our image-of-Godness also expresses and manifests itself as we relate to the rest of creation, as we rule over it.

So in one sense, man stands on the side of all the rest of creation with reference to the creator God, and in another sense man stands on the side of God in reference to the created order. When we stand on the side of God in relation to the created order, we do not stand as God Himself, but, as His image-bearers standing in for Him, representing Him. He is the owner of the world, and we are managers. He places us in charge of His creation. We are to be to it as He is to it, so far as is possible given our creaturely limitations. We are to fulfill the purpose He had for it as we manage it. In this we work out our image-of-Godness.

Speaking according to the language and terms of the ancient culture through which God has given us the book of Genesis, we are to understand ourselves as viceroys or vice-regents or vassal kings over the dominion of God. That is, He is the Great King over all the earth. He owns the land, the air, the water, the beasts. He is our King. But we too are kings. We are sub-kings, vassal kings, given the privilege of ruling over His dominion or kingdom in His place. We have rights and privileges in so doing, and we have obligations. He promises continued blessing and fellowship, on the condition that we fulfill our responsibilities as His vice-regents. Thus this arrangement is properly thought of as a covenant between God and mankind, what many scholars now refer to as the Covenant of Creation. Out of His own initiative and by His grace and goodness, He has bonded Himself to us in a covenant relationship, where He has defined the terms, and we have the joy and privilege of being His vassals as we rule over His earth.

Working With God

But what is meant by "ruling over the earth"? Look at it this way: Our king has placed us over a good, indeed a very good created order, but one which has an almost infinite capacity for bringing even further glory to Him. In this sense our world is not yet complete, not yet as full of praise and glory to God as it can be. We as His viceroys are called to manage and rule over the created order in such a way that we draw out more and more of the potential for beauty and good that is latent in it, that God would be forever more glorified by His world. So we can say that the world is good, indeed very good, but that it is not as fully very good as God has intended it to be.

But we aren't to do this alone. The owner has not left for a far-off country. Our Father is still working. We too are to work with Him as He works in and through us to draw and to squeeze out all of the glory that is latent in the created order. After all, God didn't just wind up the clock and let it run on its own. He is there with every tick. He continues to work in upholding and sustaining His work of creation. Yes God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. But He also keeps it going by His grace, mercy, and power. In so doing He does not leave His creation to fend for itself, but He is involved in caring for it. Doxology erupts again in the Psalms. The King of the earth is praised not merely for making the world, but also for His intimate involvement in it. Think of Psalm 104, which I will quote in part here:

He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. The birds of the air nest by the waters; they sing among the branches. He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the

earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate - bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart. The trees of the LORD are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. There the birds make their nests; the stork has its home in the pine trees. The high mountains belong to the wild goats; the crags are a refuge for the coney. The moon marks off the seasons, and the sun knows when to go down. You bring darkness, it becomes night, and all the beasts of the forest prowl. The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God. The sun rises, and they steal away; they return and lie down in their dens. Then man goes out to his work, to his labor until evening. How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number— living things both large and small. There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth. May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works.

This ongoing work of caring for His world is cause for praise and glory to be given to the King of the earth. We observe His care, and we praise Him accordingly. But note that God uses secondary means to sustain and uphold His world.

By these "secondary means," I refer not only to the "laws of nature," which He constantly sustains by His power, but also to us, His vice-regents. Our work is for Him a "secondary means" of taking care of His world. It is precisely at this point that our position as vice-regents, our responsibility to exercise dominion, finds deepest meaning. We stand between God and His created order, cooperating with His ministry of sustaining and preserving His world. He sustains us by His power (in Him we live, and move, and have our being). He also uses us to sustain others, and to sustain His world.

Many Christians struggle with seeing the significance of the work they are called to do. They see their work as a place for witnessing, for character building, for making money to support missionaries and church programs. But they often do not see the significance of the work itself. This is tragic. Anything about your job or your work which contributes to the good of other creatures, which helps care for and sustain them and make their life better, is a participation with God in His ministry of sustaining, preserving, and caring for His world. One thinks of the doctor who heals, the carpenter who builds, the retailer who supplies, the lawyer who defends, the policeman who protects, the accountant who keeps straight, the mechanic who keeps safe, the waiter who serves food, the banker who enables, the janitor who makes beautiful what is dirty and dull.

And I say to you: if God is praised over and over for His work of caring for and sustaining His creation, and if He is at least partly using us to do this, isn't our work therefore incredibly significant? If the work we are to do is a continuation of God's work, it can't be anything else but significant, even that which seems mundane. Much of God's sustaining work is quite literally mundane, that is, of or pertaining to this world, commonplace, and ordinary. All that is everyday, dependable, ordinary, and predictable, like the rising sun and changing seasons, like the provision of food and shelter for His creatures - He does all of this. This is God's work. How can it be insignificant? And how can our work be insignificant when we participate with Him in His work? Can't you see the glory of this? The Psalmist is carried away by the wonder of our calling:

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The glory of our position as vice-regents, as rulers over the works of His hands, does not detract from the glory of our King. Not at all! Indeed, it adds to that for which we praise Him. He is to be praised because of His wisdom and majesty in setting us over His world! Every time we do anything that helps or serves another creature in any way, let us remember this psalm.

He Planted a Garden

Now we see all of this well illustrated in Genesis 2. God has placed Adam and Eve in a garden that He Himself has planted. Adam and Eve are to take care of the garden. I suppose that this would involve pruning, composting, cultivating, transplanting, digging, watering, and harvesting. Perhaps Adam and Eve had opportunity to experiment as well (although we don't know how much time they had in the garden), to cross-pollinate or hybridize, play with color schemes, make designs in plantings, all sorts of things which would make the garden ever more beautiful and fruitful. In the garden Adam and Eve had opportunity to spend time with the other creatures. We see Adam exercising dominion by naming and categorizing the animals.

But we also see in this animal-naming exercise the rudimentary beginnings of science. What is science but learning of all the intricacies and interrelationships that exist in the created order? The spirit of exploration and discovery which should motivate the scientific endeavor results in more and more reasons to give praise to Him who made and who sustains the world. So in our work we not only help to sustain the created order, we get to explore it, and draw out its wonders.

Adam and Eve's work was not carried out alone. God did not drop them in the garden and say He would check back later. After the disobedience, in a sad and poignant verse, we get a glimpse into the intimacy that had existed between Adam and Eve and their God in the garden.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:8).

So Adam and Eve were not tending the garden and naming the animals all alone. They did this in the midst of a relationship with their God. They were not driven in their work; there was space in their daily rhythm to enjoy God who walked in the garden with them. They did not make work an idol, or view it apart from their relationship with God. Their joy was in working alongside Him. All the real human joy coming from living and working in Eden was in a sense consummated and fulfilled and wrapped up as this joy was shared with God, as it was experienced in the context of relationship with Him.

Their Children Shall Teach Them

I remember vividly an incident two or three years ago with my four little girls. Spring was in the air, and we were busy getting the garden ready for planting. Everyone was dressed in boots and overalls and we went out to turn and make ready the ten by ten foot zinnia garden. "Aren't I doing a good job, Dad?" "This is good work, isn't it, Dad?" "Dad, you sure are strong!" "This is going to be really pretty, isn't it, Dad?"

They loved the work - the feel of the soil, the smells of spring that swirled around, the sense of accomplishment at performing a little task. There was joy in having dominion, in being creative, in imagining what the garden would look like, and having a role in bringing that about. But really it wasn't so much just the work itself that they loved. It was doing the work with me! It was as if the love of the work was consummated and completed only in sharing it with their father.

Lying Down On the Job

I remember that I went in for a drink and to make a phone call, and left them to continue on with the digging, which took about fifteen minutes. I looked out the window and two of them were lying down, discouraged and tired, and the other two were arguing over who was doing the best job. One became driven and domineering of the others. But when I returned, we all got back into it. We worked hard turning the hard red clay soil, got good and sweaty, and then all plopped down in a heap. One of the girls ran inside and in a few minutes came out with water for everyone. What a memory!

When I was with them their energy seemed boundless. They worked in reference to me, pleasing me, enjoying me, thriving on my encouragements. When I left, the work itself became the focus. They became competitive. Who was stronger? Who was smarter? Who could dig the fastest? The harmony between them broke down in my absence. They noticed little ailments and tired quickly. One of them became obsessed with the job, wanting, I guess, to prove a point.

My presence with them gave joy and meaning to them as persons, and gave joy and meaning to their work. My presence with them put the work in its place. It showed that the work had meaning relative to me, and not so much just in itself.

And even though we had a specific goal and worked very hard, the time came when we needed to stop. We collapsed together in a pile. We rested. We lay back on the grass and watched the clouds and the birds. We were together. Even I didn't want just to work and work and work. As important as getting the zinnia garden planted was, even more important was my relationship with them. So I wanted to relax with them and enjoy them.

Likewise, God planted a garden in Eden. He could have gone on to plant gardens all over the place if all He wanted to do was plant gardens. But Eden provided a safe place, a haven, for His creatures, for Adam and Eve. And then He walked with them in the garden. Eden was not just a place to work, it was an environment for a relationship. The work had its rightful place, but was not everything. Do not forget that the very next day after creating mankind and commissioning them to subdue the earth, God rested, He "sabbathed." We are to follow His pattern of working and resting. Thus, the Sabbath also limits the degree to which the command to subdue the earth binds us as His creatures. Our calling is important, our work is important, but we are to work in fellowship with Him, and then stop altogether to rest and enjoy the world with Him. There is a time to work alongside of Him; there is a time just to be with Him. As important as our work is, it isn't to consume us.

The Fall

Sadly, things didn't continue to work out so well for Adam and Eve. Unfortunately, as you well know, our experience of work was drastically affected by our disobedience in Adam and Eve, and by the judgments which followed. Since we now live and work in the aftermath of humankind's fall, we can only understand our work fully in light of this fall. Many Christians err just here. They have expectations of what their jobs should deliver to them in terms of meaning, reward, or fulfillment, and thus they never come to grips with the way their jobs almost always fail to deliver. They are unsettled, angry, negative, fighting in their hearts against the reality of work in a fallen world.

In Genesis chapter 3, after Adam and Eve disobeyed, we find them hiding from God. Whereas they once labored in joy in His presence, they now hide and find that they must carry on, as it were, in hiding, apart from Him.

Likewise for us, because of our alienation from God, work goes on without reference to Him. This makes our labor fundamentally off-kilter. Since our existence, and therefore our work, is first and foremost to bring glory to God, and to enjoy Him as we do this, the nature of our work must change when that purpose is abandoned. Work comes to be motivated by greed or lust for power or the need for self justification. Whereas before I may have planted a tree to please my Father in heaven, now I do it to please myself, or to have others pleased with my efforts, honoring, loving, and admiring me. Or perhaps I now work to control the supply of food, to succeed in competition with my neighbor, or to develop an implement of war.

I Am Different, So My Working Is Different

Notice that the change in me has changed my working. My work, both in terms of what I do and how and why I do it, remains connected with who and what I am even after the fall. So all of the sins and inner ambiguities and problems that come upon me in my alienation from God radically affect my work. Who I am has changed, and thus the nature of my work has changed with it. Inevitably, I carry who I am into what I do. The two are inseparable.

And naturally, since all the other people out there working have also been radically affected by the fall, our work becomes a place of conflict with them. The relationship between Adam and Eve is forever altered by their disobedience to God. They cast blame; they scapegoat the other. Marriage relationships, and by implication, all human relationships, are cursed. Brokenness between people enters the world. Cain is jealous that Abel's work seems more acceptable to God, and He kills Abel. For each of us, the difficulties and challenges of work have a lot to do with the difficulties and challenges of human relationships. We cannot separate out our work from our relationships. Even the most task-oriented subsistence worker occasionally comes into contact with others. Thus, much of what people struggle with in their jobs is not the job itself at all, it is the people they have to deal with in their jobs. All of the sins that impact relationships thus impact our work.

The Ground Is Cursed

But it is not just us that changed after the fall. Even the ground itself is changed radically by the specific curse placed upon it by God. Notice how this reads in Genesis 3:17-20:

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful

toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

God has placed a curse upon the ground. The result is that the ground produces thorns and thistles in addition to the intended plants, which increases the difficulty of the work required to produce the food needed to eat and live. Life and work, work and life, become laborious and miserable, even unto death.

The economy of words used here to describe the curse should not lead us to limit the scope of this curse. Something fundamental has changed in the world. But it is hard to imagine just what has happened. Has God brought into being new forms of plant and animal life which fight back at man? Has the ground become less nutrient-rich and harder to work? Has the constitution of man become so weakened that what was once easy and painless now has become hard and laborious? I suppose that to some degree all of these things have happened. The result is that work is hard and painful. The world is out of whack, with things happening that never would have happened. I think of Murphy's law as entering into existence just here. Something is amiss. Things go awry. Often. Without warning. Just at the wrong time. The unpleasant things keep coming back. Decay is relentless. We turn our backs and the herd has moved to a new feeding ground, the field is covered with weeds, the paint is peeling and water is rotting the timbers, the food bin is filled with maggots, and of course the dishes always have to be washed. Everything has to be cleaned, and cleaned again, since disease lurks, ready to pounce. Work becomes a never-ending grind. A sense of futility enters into our hearts. A storm arises out of nowhere and destroys the house we have been laboring so hard to build. We invest all of our resources into a business, and after two years the city approves a new highway that cuts off all traffic flow to our store, and we lose everything. Despite all of our efforts, the competition gets the edge, and all we can hope for is to survive until we retire. We put in thirty years for The Company, and we're dropped like hot potatoes when profits decline.

But as if all this weren't enough, death casts its horrible shadow across our work. This affects us in several ways. First, because our physical bodies are subject to decay that leads to death, they are weakened by sickness, by pains and ailments, and by disease. This makes work all the more hard and trying. Second, since we seek to have a sense of accomplishment and to achieve goals in our work, whether righteous or unrighteous goals, we are torn by the reality that our death blocks us off from realizing the fullness of our hopes and dreams. Third, we realize that our work may or may not survive our death. We can do little to assure that what we have so labored to accomplish will not be ignored, reversed, or destroyed after our demise. In no way will we be around to guarantee that our results of our labors will remain.

Banished From the Garden

And finally, just to seal the matter forever, Adam and Eve were banished from the garden of God and cast into a hostile environment. It is in this new, more hostile environment, that we now work. No longer would mankind work ground prepared and planted by God Himself. No more would the garden offer safe haven.

I will admit that this is a pretty gloomy picture. It seems the only colors I have are grays and browns and blacks. But I have wanted you to see just what you are facing. I do not want you to be naive about your work. Yet, despite all of the darkness and gloom which has descended upon our reflection about work, we must also realize that there is much color in the picture after all.

Remember for a moment the Psalms I have quoted in this letter - Psalms 19 and 104 and 148. Go back and read these again, with this thought in mind: All of these are written after the fall, by writers reflecting on the world as it is post-fall. Despite the fall, despite the change which has come over our world, the world is still a place of wonder and beauty and richness. God still works to sustain and uphold, even after the fall. He still uses us. The original command to work has not been lifted. The original purpose for our work has not changed. We are still called to exercise dominion over the earth as we participate with God in sustaining and preserving His world.

The Creation Mandate Goes On

God Himself takes the initiative and extends mercy to His rebellious creatures, after their rebellion, and despite their sinfulness. "YHWH God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (Gen 3:21). Despite the awesome gloom of the curse, God Himself cushions the blow by His mercy and grace. He covers their shame, but He also gives them protection and warmth in their new clothes. And He does this before casting them from the garden. In His grace He equips them for life in a hostile world.

Despite the extent of the curse, mankind is not punished as thoroughly as he might have been. God's mercy still abounds as He shields us from the fullest consequences of our rebellion. The beautiful blue sky still brings joy. The cool breeze at the end of a long day working still feels great. The sense of accomplishment at a job well done still gives us courage to go on.

In spite of our rebellion, the commandment to exercise dominion over the earth is not revoked. Even though we went on after our expulsion from Eden to turn loving dominion into selfish exploitation; even though we made a mess of things as we labored and worked for our own glory; even though we brought hurt to ourselves as we rejected the terms of the Covenant of Creation; nevertheless, God's mercy is extended once again. He promises to do something about the mess. He promises a coming Descendent who will destroy the serpent and the serpent's work. He promises to set in motion a series of events which will undo our undoing.

Because of our creation commission, work is filled with meaning and purpose. Because of the fall, the fulfilling of this mandate is much more difficult than it would otherwise have been, and can never be fully realized. What we have failed to attain however, has been attained by Jesus. In Him the commandment to exercise dominion over the earth has been and is being fulfilled. With Jesus reigning at the right hand of God, we now have two works of God running parallel, the work of sustaining the world, and the work of redeeming the world. There may seem to be confusion as to what God's agenda is in and with His world. Suffice it to say for now that the work of "making disciples" involves "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This includes teaching them to obey, and to begin to fulfill, the mandate of creation.

Does God still want us to participate with Him as he cares for His world, even while He is also working to redeem the world? Does God still want us to work to draw out all the glory we can from the world, even though He promises a New Heaven and New Earth? Does He still want us to learn all about His world so that He can be further praised? Yes. Yes. And yes.

The Creation mandate goes on. Our work, our everyday real work, still matters to God.

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